

TWENTY YEARS OF TEACHING DANCING

This winter will mark twenty years from the date of my first dance program appearance, which led me into the career of teaching dancing, although I had even then a rich folk dance background, in spite of my youthful age.

The first dancing I can remember doing was at my Mother's second wedding when I was five years old. My Mother had been widowed when I was not quite three, and she was still in pregnancy with my only full brother, Arejas Leonas. At the wedding party Mother was seated in a corner of the house on an improvised throne to receive guest who came up to congratulate her, while Dad was with the men guests. I stood near Mother's throne, gaping at the guests as they greeted her. A young female guest, some sort of a relative, who, because of my smallness, seemed to be very tall and lanky, took hold of me and led me into the dancing of Suktinis, a popular Lithuanian ball-room folk dance. She took the man's part and we danced through it (creditably, I reckon), for all I remember was that I "danced" and was mighty proud of myself. I was more impressed by the delighted glances of the nondancing guests, than with what I was doing.

Most of my dancing occurred when I was about eight to ten years old and attending school in Prienai. Week-ends (and often during the week) we met at the home of girl classmates and spent the evening dancing, accompanied by our own singing. We first did a few circle games such as Aguonėlė, Žvirblis and Našlys. However, in the cities the folk ballroom dances, particularly the Russian ones, were the most popular. Alexandrovskia, Karapiet, Korobotchka, Pas d'Esplan, Kokietka, Vengierga, a ballroom form of the Krakowiak, along with Suktinis and Noriu Miego were the most popular and most often performed dances.

After I came to the United States, the aunt who brought me here insisted that I accompany the family to American ballrooms. I was greatly disappointed in the American form of dance. Foxtrots were popular, but I could see nothing to it. It had neither life nor beauty. For a while I did no dancing at all. When sometime later my aunt asked what I wanted to be when I grew up, and I blurted out "A dancer", well, an unexpected storm broke out. She started weeping and screaming at me, and in anger threw a coat on the floor. She was sure that I would be a disgrace to the family, etc. That and many other events put a damper on our relationship, and I finally broke away from the family and started life on my own. I worked during the day, attended school at night, and on weekends went folk dance "slumming". For Lithuanian dances I attended the Parish Halls and the Lithuanian Auditorium. However the Lithuanians danced mainly the ballroom type of the folk dance: Suktinis, Klumpakojis and Noriu Miego, plus polkas galore.

I dug up various nationalities in my desire to folk dance: Yugoslav, Czech, Hungarian, Polish, Ukrainian (at St. Mary's where I met Luba Kowalska, the priest's daughter and an excellent leader), Jewish (Zionist), Arabic, Ladino and Hindu.

The Arabs were divided into two groups. The Moslems lived around 18th and State Streets. They were mainly Palestinian Arabs, batchelors and peddlers by trade. The Christians were mainly Syrians, living around Fairfield and Ogden Avenues. They had a church of their own (Uniate), were family folk, owned small businesses, and many their own homes. In the Syrian colony I met Mrs. Fareida Mahzar, the world-noted "Lit-

tle Egypt" of Columbian Exposition fame. Though no longer young when I met her, she was still quite nimble. I was fascinated by a balancing type of dance she performed. A bottle was placed on her head, and on the bottle a candelabra holding lighted candles. Gracefully she moved about, lowered herself to the floor, rolled and turned around on the floor and rose again. To me it was a terrific feat. I told her that I was very much interested in Oriental dances and hoped to do them. She replied that Americans knew nothing about Oriental dancing. To them "hootchie kootchie" was Oriental dancing, that I looked like a "nice boy" and she would not want me to become that. I promised that I would not.

The Ladinos were Spanish speaking Sefardic Jews who were driven from Spain in 1492, the year Columbus discovered America. They settled in Moslem countries: Northern Africa, Egypt, Turkey and Greece. The Chicago Ladinos were mainly from Turkey. The colony then was close and compact and did not mix with the "Rusos" or European Jews. Through luck I was accepted in their inner circle, was well received and made friends with the Vardon and Grazian clan (which was all one needed). I was permitted to join the Youth Club headed by Joe Varon, the age range being from fourteen to eighteen (and I was still in that category) with most of the members being in the fifteen to sixteen age level. I was even chosen to debate the question "Whether the Marranos (Jews who did not want to leave Spain and so were converted to Christianity) were justified in their move. The Marranos were wealthy Jews, and their conversion helped them little as their wealth was coveted by those in power, and many perished at the hands of the Inquisition. I was given the negative side, and I learned plenty about the Ladinos.

Their dances were mostly Zebyks (a Turkish Hora). Often the circle was led by an ancient, pipe smoking lady, Mrs. Aziz, who was affectionately called by all "Grandma". She could wiggle her arms beautifully.

The group which left the strongest impression on me was the Hindu. In the rooming house where I lived there also resided a Mrs. Kummer, an American lady of about fifty, cultured and gracious. She did some writing. When we became acquainted, she thought that because of my interest in the Orient, I'd enjoy meeting the Hindu group. It was a religious philosophy group, the "Vedanta" (teaching of the Vedas) as established by the aesthetic Ramakrishna and his "apostle" Vivekenanda. The leader of the Chicago group was Swami Gnaneswara, a genteel Bengali, low spoken, humble, beloved by all, and saintly in bearing. He was highly educated in Western and Eastern cultures, and in the Hindu arts, particularly music.

With Mrs. Kummer I first went to a Hindu meditation and lecture meeting. Then to a class where the Bhagavat Gita (the Lord's Song) and the Upanishads (the Hindu holy scripts) were instructed by the Swami (teacher). Soon I knew the inner circle well enough to be invited to the closed-to-the-public festivals at the headquarters, 1 Walton Street, and to the Hindu musical instrument rehearsal.

When I first attended the musical rehearsal, I was so charmed that I felt I was floating on a magic carpet to the land of mystery. The instruments consisted of sitars, esraj, vinas (types of string instruments), tabolas (male and female drums) and tals (a type of finger cymbal). The group was taught by the Swami. He also taught Hindu songs. I wanted to join the orchestra, but I was already too involved. I belonged to a Hebrew (Halevy) choir, the Ladino group, attended night school, worked days, visited numerous religious groups to ob-

serve their way of life: Chaldean, Greek Orthodox and Eastern Catholic of the Ukrainian rite, moslem, Hindu. I attended Mass at the Catholic church and all types of nationality functions. I had spread myself pretty thin for a young punk still in my teens.

In the Hindu group there was a girl about my age, Sarojini Devi, who was the official dancer. I observed her work very closely, and the Swamiji (an endearing term for Swami) gave me many pointers on the Hindu dance, and soon I was appearing in Hindu dances. My great triumph came when the group celebrated an important anniversary of Sri Ramakrishna in 1935. It was a three day festival and Swamis from all over the United States, as well as some Christian leaders, were present at the banquet. I did some solo dances, and one proved almost fatal. Representing Shiva, I stood on a small table (most of the dance being done while balancing on the ball of the right foot) which was covered by a fancy cloth that twisted and slipped under my foot. I sweated and prayed that nothing would happen. Everyone was tense, probably expecting me to tumble, but I finished that dance upright and without mishap. The really big day was the following afternoon when we presented a full program of instrumental, vocal and dance numbers. I choreographed the program and trained Sarojini and Beldon Starr, now one of Chicago's leading male dancers of the modern-surrealistic type. He had been attending my folk classes and I chose him for a part which he did very well. The story was based on a religious theme involving the Dod Shiva, which part I played. The papers gave us beautiful write-ups, the Tribune claiming that "The type of dance which was made familiar by Uday ShanKar was made even clearer by us." That I considered a feather in my cap.

I was a member of that group until the untimely death of the Swami in 1937. His passing was genuinely mourned. It was a terrific blow and loss to the group. At his wake rose petals were strewn on his feet—no other flowers being visible—and many mourners kissed his bare feet. He was cremated, the nearest thing to the Hindu rite of Ghat. OM TAT SAT OM.

The events which more directly led me into the folk dance field took place in the winter of 1931-32 among the Lithuanians.

I had at first stayed away from Lithuanian activities, expect for a few dances, Mass at St. George's, or Lithuanian Independence Day celebrations. One of the reasons was that I had a full background of Lithuanian lore. There were many choirs, but I had learned dozens of folk songs from my Mother. In my zeal I wanted to learn things about which I knew little or nothing. In the meanwhile I wrote short stories and sent them to "Naujienos", one of the dailies in Chicago. For their winter concert, Mr. Augustas of the "Naujienos" staff, invited me to perform. I was thrilled as it was my first concert appearance. I danced a Hindu and a Spanish solo, and a Lithuanian duet (my choreography) with Miss Irena Juozaitis. My offerings were received warmly, and the reviews were very favorable.

In the meanwhile, another aunt of mine was persuading me to move in with her family. She encouraged me to continue with my dancing, helped me find a little studio on 33rd and Halsted, and "drummed up" customers, (children in the neighborhood) as my students. That was the beginning of my teaching career.

For the Chicago World's Fair in 1933 I trained a troupe of eight couples as part of the program for the Lithuanian Day activities. I also organized the Lithuanian Youth Society (LYS) which, until the war's outbreak, was an important organization with five branch-

es in Chicago. It sponsored sports, art exhibits, and had one of the finest ethnic folk dance groups anywhere, representing the Lithuanians at all civic affairs and other festivals.

It was during a festival held in Humboldt Park in the early days of WPA that Dorothea Nelson of the Chicago Park District came up to compliment me on the beautiful presentation of the group. She inquired if I could accept a position with the Chicago Park District to teach folk dancing (WPA salary). I was so sure that she was kidding me that I said I would and then dismissed the whole thing from my mind. To my great surprise, within a few days a letter arrived asking me to come to the Administration Building as a job was waiting for me. I was equipped to fill it — thanks to my teen age "foolishness" in hanging around with all kinds of "foreigners". I was given a number of parks where I was to teach folk dancing according to the neighborhood — Polish at Humboldt Park; Lithuanian at Mark White and Marquette; Jewish - Palestinian at Douglas; and at far south side park, Mexican. I also had several settlement houses, where I taught Mexican at Henry Booth, Czech and Yugoslav at Howell House, Lithuanian at Fellowship. For the Park District I put on two very successful Lithuanian St. John's festivals, published a folk lore magazine, "Lore", and my reputation as a teacher began to spread beyond the boundaries of Chicago, which made possible the start of my travels and trips.

The above is an "outdrawn" synopsis with some of the highlights and causes which eventually established me in the folk dance and folk lore fields. There is a great deal more to tell and that will come at a later time, but this must suffice for the present.

V. F. Beliajus



Retelling from the Beginning:—

This is my second encounter with the White Plague. Though upon my entry to the Cottage Hill, Alabama, Sanatorium on January 20, 1943, I was given only six weeks to live, I did not suffer the severe pain and agony which my present encounter with the disease has produced. In fact, in Alabama I was ambulant all of the time, while now I have been bedfast for practically five months. This is partly due, no doubt, to the fact that I underwent no clinical tests in Alabama.

The clinical and laboratory tests given me in Willmington, Delaware, and especially those in Philadelphia, were so exhaustive and "murderous" that I felt those administering them had been trained in the Nazi concentration camp torture chambers. No wonder that after the tests were through, I was too—minus twenty pounds and all strenght or interest in what was to happen to me.

The first findings were anemia, intestinal disorders, infected kidney, traces of cancer, tuberculosis of the lungs, skin and blood. The last was enough to scare me and everyone—and scare it did! The hospital to which I had been taken was not equipped to treat TB. I was isolated (fenced in it seemed to me) in a dark corner of a room and behind screens in the humid atmosphere of Philadelphia. For the next three weeks my corner was not swept as the lay attendants feared to come near me, and few of the nurses dared. An exception to the rule was a tiny Armenian lady from Turkey, Miss Esther Yeremian, who was chock-full of the milk of human